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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examined conditions affecting how six elementary teachers who were involved in an ongoing inservice program embraced, comprehended, and applied elements of classroom management via cooperative learning. The paper described factors that helped and hindered their attempts. Data collection included site visits with observations, questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group discussions. The study lasted for 1 year, with data collected before, during, and after staff development sessions that helped them implement cooperative learning. Data analysis indicated that teacher beliefs and practices changed, but relatively little. The participants believed in cooperative learning before the study began. As the year progressed, they used it more often, were more confident in their practices, and were clearer about which teaching method and relevant classroom management techniques to use at any given time. For all six, teaching proper behavior was a high priority. Classroom management was not always distinct from their lessons but instead often integrated within. Behavior problems often became teaching opportunities. Teachers took more responsibility for solving student problems at the beginning of the year, but they delegated more as the year progressed. All used certain extrinsic motivators for behavior. Teachers' theories and beliefs affected their choices regarding grouping of students, pedagogy, and classroom management. (Contains approximately 123 references.) (SM)

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From Extrinsic Guidance Toward Student Self-Control

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Purpose and Objectives

This paper investigates the conditions affecting how and to what degree teachers who are involved in an ongoing inservice program embrace, comprehend, and apply elements of classroom management via cooperative learning. The form of research is an ethnographic case study of six teachers in a metropolitan public elementary school who are working toward incorporating cooperative learning into their everyday classroom practices. The goal of the study is to identify and describe factors that help and hinder their attempts.

The school reflects the diversity of urban America. There are new immigrants and others whose families have several generations of citizens. Many are permanent residents of the community, while over half are military dependents whose families usually live nearby only one to three years. In working with a population of whites, blacks, various Asian ethnicities, and others, the teachers' challenge is to successfully integrate all, both academically and socially.

Most research on classroom management and cooperative learning focuses on the students and their behavior. This one emphasizes the change and growth of teachers in their search to improve their ability to support the students progress toward greater independence via interdependence.

Review of the Literature

Different authors' works discuss both relevant theoretical bases and different methods best used with certain educational purposes in mind. These ideas give some insight regarding why and how to implement certain practices.

Three major rationales support cooperative learning: learning theory, democracy, and preparation for careers and life. Vygotsky (1978) discusses the ability of an individual to improve by collaborating with more capable peers. Piaget (1932) feels that certain types of knowledge, such as social-arbitrary, can only be developed

through interaction with others. Constructivist cognitive psychology, as cited by the Sharans (1992) in Israel and Goodman (1991) in Arizona, also supports the value of social interaction in helping people expand their language base to interpret reality and build understanding, as does social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Several different authors argue that democracy is both supported by and a basis for cooperative learning. Francis Parker (1883, 1937), John Dewey (1916), John Goodlad (1994) and others conclude that social interaction is a critical element of democracy. Jeanne Gibbs (1994) and Spencer Kagan (1992) both conclude that cooperative learning and democracy must be integrated with each other. Dewey (1915) and Goodlad (1984), among many others, state that school should prepare students for careers and life. They cite the importance of school as a model of society in helping them become responsible citizens, the need to prepare them for team efforts in the workplace, and the need to interact with others throughout their lives. Behavior plays a critical part in one's role as a citizen.

The different types of cooperative learning and classroom management also may be understood in terms of teachers' educational goals. Some management systems provide more equal democratic interaction. Research shows cooperative learning useful in supporting academic gains, improving social interaction, developing racial integration, and increasing self-esteem, all of which may have a positive effect of student behavior. In studying different authors' methods, one may place each one's emphasis on a continuum from dependent to independent. Highly structured methods, in which the teacher makes the decisions regarding who does what, when, and how, are more appropriate for students and classes who are younger or more dependent upon others. For students who are older, experienced with solving problems and/or cooperative learning, or otherwise more self-sufficient, teachers may delegate more authority and responsibility for decision-making to the group, using a less structured format for such independent students. The teacher

assesses the needs, noting how able the students are at self-management, before deciding upon how best to manage the class.

Methodology

This is a multiple case study of six teachers in the same elementary school, with two second-grade teachers, and one each in grades three, four, five, and six. During the research, many relevant questions regarding classroom management emerged. The study uses evidence from a variety of data-gathering methods, including site visits with observations, questionnaires, many individual interviews, and a few focus group discussions. The study lasted for one school year, with data collected before, during, and after the staff development sessions designed to help them implement cooperative learning. It includes teacher self-report data, plus observations from the author and two others who visited the teachers' classrooms. The various methods, length of the study, and use of multiple observers are used as checks on accuracy of the data.

There are limitations. Case studies can be subject, at least in part, to the researcher's selective subjectivity. The use of triangulation may help mitigate the effect of any bias.

Data Analysis (also see 1 page handout with figures)

Evidence from the data is used to describe changes in teacher beliefs and practices, relevant applications of theory, and how theory impacts specific aspects of teacher beliefs and practices.

Teacher beliefs and practices changed, but relatively little. The six involved were volunteers; they already believed in cooperative learning. As the year progressed, they used cooperative learning more often, were more confident in their practices, and clearer about which teaching method and relevant classroom management technique(s) to use at any given time.

For each of the six teachers in the study, teaching proper behavior was a high priority. Classroom management was not always distinct from their lessons, but instead often integrated within, either as part of their plan, or dealt with naturally as it occurred. A behavior problem often became a teaching opportunity. In general, the teachers took more responsibility for solving student problems at the beginning of the year, but delegated more as the year progressed. Some conflicts, however, were evident. The teachers showed greater delegation in cooperative learning than in classroom management; a modified assertive discipline program was used by most throughout the year, and all used certain extrinsic motivators for behavior.

In the classroom, teacher theories and beliefs affected their choices regarding grouping of students, pedagogy, and classroom management. As the staff development emphasis was mostly concerned with the first two of these, at times some of the teachers made choices regarding how to handle student behavior that seemed to contradict what they were trying to do in terms of supporting student growth toward greater independence. Their beliefs influenced their practices more than theories did, but they were not aware of the inconsistency between choices of pedagogy versus choices of classroom management, nor that this conflict sometimes undermined goals in each.

Conclusions

Several conclusions follow from the research. They include a general suggestion regarding guiding students toward greater self-sufficiency that applies both to teacher decision-making with classroom management and cooperative learning. Other results pertain to the relative lack of influence of theories on the teachers; thus the greater potential for conflict when two aspects of a classroom, such as teaching behavior and cooperation, could work better if one theory guided both.

Educators should assess the climate of their classroom first, building a positive learning environment and teaching necessary social skills before and/or concurrently

with any cooperative learning methods. By addressing needs in this order, students are more likely to trust one another, and more able to interact effectively in groups.

Students mature, ideally becoming fully independent as adults. During the course of an academic year, each teacher serves as a guide for each student, helping each one take another step toward the ability to "fly solo". Relevance for this with respect to cooperative learning means that the teacher should gradually delegate more authority and responsibility to the groups. With younger students, or those with less problem-solving and cooperative learning experience, the teacher is more likely to make all decisions regarding who will do what, when, and how, in each group. As the year progresses, or with older students, the teacher should delegate more of the decisions regarding who settles the students' own problems.

Educational Importance

The study has relevance for any educators interested in effectively identifying and solving student problems. In the classroom, as elsewhere in society, the ideal is to move from decisions dictated by another, through arbitration, mediation, and (ideally) negotiation between the concerned parties, to whom the teacher can delegate with confidence. While this research included only elementary school teachers, both secondary teachers and university professors have found classroom applications useful. Testing such generalizations more formally is possible for future research.

The practical significance of the research lies in the guidance it offers educators on how to use theory to guide practice, work consistently toward goals, and solve problems. The concepts of learning theory, democracy, plus career and life preparation may serve as guides for all educational decisions regarding behavior and cooperation, in helping students progress toward greater self-management.

Note: These references are from a larger work used as a basis for the AERA papers. The complete dissertation reference is printed at the end of the last page. -Bill Geary

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